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THE STRUCTURE AND TEACHING OF THE APOCALYPSE.¹

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1. WE may set aside for the purposes of this study the question whether the Apocalypse is a record of actual, divinely given visions, and also the question whether it is a compilation of earlier apocalypses. For as it stands it is manifestly a unity, as even such an uncompromising analyst as Professor Briggs allows;² and the seer, author, or editor who is responsible for its present form clearly intended it to be read and understood as if it were a series of actual visions.

2. How many visions, or rather groups of visions, are there? At the most eight,³ whose contents may be thus summarized:

SYNOPSIS OF VISIONS.

CHAP.

1: 1-8 Title, Dedication, Motto, etc.

I.

1: 9-20 Vision of the glorified Christ, who dictates

2 and 3 Messages to the Seven Churches.

II.

4 Vision of God's presence in Heaven (background of all that follows).

5 Book with SEVEN SEALS given to the Lamb.

6 Six Seals opened; six Visions appear.

7 144,000 sealed against coming trouble. *Multitude* come out of great tribulation.

8: 1 *Seventh* Seal opened; half hour's silence.

III.

8: 2-6 *Prayers of Saints* offered upon Altar, from which fire is cast to earth.

¹ The writer has learned most from the following books: BOYD CARPENTER, *Revelation of St. John* (in the *Handy Commentary*); MILLIGAN, *Revelation of St. John* (Baird Lectures, 1885); T. L. SCOTT, *Visions of the Apocalypse* (Donnellan Lectures, 1891-2); C. J. VAUGHAN, *Lectures on the Revelation*.

² *Messiah of the Apostles*, p. 289.

³ We cannot make seven, unless we join chap. 8 to chap. 7. But the relation of these two is the same as that of chap. 6 to chap. 5.

- 8: 7—9 Six TRUMPETS sounded bring limited plagues upon the ungodly.
 10 *Little Book* eaten by the Seer, that he may prophesy further.
 11: 1—14 *Two Witnesses* forty-two months; *Beast* overcomes them; their bodies
 lie in street of *Great City* three and one-half days; they rise and
 ascend.
 11: 15—19 *Seventh Trumpet*; Kingdom has become Christ's; Judgment has come.

IV.

- 12 *Woman* bears the child. *Dragon* seeks to destroy each.
 13 *Dragon* gives power to *First Beast*, whom *Second Beast* upholds.
 14: 1—5 144,000 with the Lamb upon Mount Zion,
 14: 6—20 Brief anticipation of the rest of the Book: (a) Hour of God's judgment;
 (b) Fall of Babylon; (c) Destruction of followers of *Beast*;
 (d) Blessedness of Holy Dead; (e) Harvest and Vintage.

V.

- 15 (a) Song of Victors. Preparation for pouring out *Bowls* (vials).
 16 SEVEN BOWLS pour out final, universal plagues upon the wicked.
 (Sixth bowl compare (c); seventh, compare (b).)

VI.

- 17 (b) The *Harlot* (Babylon, Rome) upon the *Beast*; to be destroyed by it.
 18 *Fall of Babylon* proclaimed; lamented by the worldly.
 19: 1—10 Heavenly joy over Babylon's fall, for the Bride of the Lamb is ready.

VII.

- 19: 11—21 (c) The Word of God wars against and *destroys Beast* and its adherents.
 20: 1—10 (d) *Satan bound* 1,000 years. Martyrs and faithful *reign with Christ* in
 new life. *Satan's* last effort and *final overthrow*.
 20: 11—21: 8 (e) Last Judgment. *New heaven and earth*. *New Jerusalem* for the
 Victor.

VIII.

- 21: 9—22: 9 Vision of the New Jerusalem.
 22: 10—21 Epilogue.

3. In studying the structure of the book we are struck by this fact: In each of the visions there is introduced, sometimes very briefly and abruptly and without any hint of its meaning, a symbol, or group of symbols, which in a subsequent vision is taken up and expanded, or perhaps explained. It is as if the seer, pondering over the vision which he had last received, and finding in it details which were puzzling, were represented as having another vision granted him, in which these details were more fully developed. So uniformly is this the case that it may be laid down as a law of the book's structure and a help to the interpretation. Whether it be that the visions actually took

place in this way, or that the writer or editor intentionally arranged them to produce this effect, need not be taken into consideration. A study of the details will make this point clearer.

In vision I the phenomenon is observable within the vision itself. The symbols by which the glorified Christ represents his attributes in the vision of chap. 1 are severally taken up in the introductory words of each of the seven epistles, and are likewise seen to be suitable to the message to that particular church. Compare, for instance, chap. 2: 1 with 1: 12, 16, on the one hand, and with 2: 2, 5 on the other. In one or two cases the connection is not perfectly clear, but the principle is sufficiently established. Similarly the promise in the concluding verse or verses of each of the seven epistles not only is seen to be suitable to the body of the message, but also in every case it looks forward; and since each promise is made "to the victor" (*τῷ νικῶντι*), the symbol is found to recur in that part of the book where the idea of victory is most prominent, viz., chap. 19: 11 to the end.⁴

In vision II the prayers of the "souls under the altar" for vengeance are taken up in vision III as the "prayers of all saints upon the golden altar," from which altar fire is cast into the earth as the symbol of the coming of that vengeance. And again, chap. 7: 3, "Hurt not the earth neither the sea nor the trees till we shall have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads," is taken up in 8: 7, 8, where the earth, sea, and trees are hurt, while (9: 4) the sealed are safe from harm.

In vision III all the following visions are prepared for in the words (10: 11), "Thou must prophesy again over many peoples and nations and tongues and kings;" and in chap. 11 the period of 1260 days, the "beast" that "shall make war with" those who witness for God, and the "great city" where truth seems to be crushed to earth, are all abruptly and enigmatically introduced (vss. 3, 7, 8); but the "beast" becomes the central figure in the next vision; and the "great city," alluded to again in visions IV and V, finds its full explanation in the sixth vision.

⁴With chap. 2: 7 cf. 22: 2, 14; with 2: 11 cf. 20: 14; 21: 7, 8; with 2: 17 cf. 19: 12; with 2: 27 f. cf. 19: 15; 20: 4-6; 22: 16; with 3: 5 cf. 19: 8, 14; 20: 12, 15; with 3: 12 cf. 19: 12; 21: 10, 22; 22: 4, 14; with 3: 21 cf. 20: 4; 21: 7; 22: 1.

Again, in vision IV we find in the last part (chap. 14:6-20) what may be described as a brief summary of the remainder of the book; 14:7 seems an allusion to the vision of the bowls (*cf.* especially 16:2-4); 14:8 (the fall of Babylon) certainly anticipates vision VI. Vss. 9-12 correspond with 19:11-21; vs. 13 perhaps with 20:4-6; and the symbols of the judgment in vss. 14-20 certainly correspond to 20:11-15.

In vision V, under the sixth bowl the armies gather together to war, which war is described in 19:19-21; while at the seventh bowl Babylon falls—a brief statement which is expanded and explained in the next vision (chaps. 17; 18; 19:1-10).

After the fall of Babylon, in vision VI, we hear no more of that "great city;" but in the latter part of the vision we are told that now (as if in consequence of this fall) "the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready"—and this is explained by the "Bride" of 21:2, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Finally, just as the seventh part of vision V (the fall of Babylon, the harlot) is taken up and expanded in the next vision, so in vision VII its seventh part (21:1-8, the coming from heaven of Jerusalem the Bride) is expanded in vision VIII—the description of the heavenly city come down to earth in 21:9-22:9.

4. Stating the book in the light of this peculiarity of its structure, we say that it appears to describe a series of independent yet connected visions, referring to the conflict of the church with its foes; that each of these visions concludes with an allusion to or symbol of events which belong to the end of human history as conceived by the seer; that, therefore, each of the visions may be said to represent one aspect of this conflict, with an assurance of the final triumph of good; and that some detail or details of each vision forms the text or the keynote of one or more of the visions that follow. That the writer of the book ("searching what or what manner of time the spirit of Christ that was in him did signify when it testified beforehand the sufferings of" the body of "Christ and the glory that should follow") may have thought the issue of the conflict to be close at

hand is very likely; but that the outline given above would represent his own general conception of the book lies almost upon the surface.⁵

5. What light does this view of the structure of the Apocalypse throw upon the question as to the historical events and personages symbolized in the different visions? It may be confidently said, to begin with, that the "continuous-historical" system of interpretation, fashionable not so very long ago, is manifestly excluded. If each of these various visions covers, more or less fully, the ground of human history up to the close of this dispensation, then the events symbolized in the Seal visions are not necessarily antecedent to the Trumpet visions, nor these to the Beasts. The fact that human ingenuity can point out a sequence of historical events apparently corresponding to the different verses and paragraphs of the book proves nothing, when we remember that the same thing has been done, verse by verse, with the Song of Songs.⁶ We are not, however, to conclude from this that the symbols of the book have no reference to human history. Indeed, that historical characters and events of the seer's own time are referred to is very generally accepted; the only question is whether there is any reference to the history of the church between the author's time and the still future consummation.

6. Symbols, it must be remembered, primarily denote abstract ideas. The appropriateness of a symbol to represent a concrete person or fact comes always from a relation between that person

⁵One more feature may be alluded to before passing to further questions of interpretation. In each one of the visions of conflict there is introduced, in what a late writer has spoken of as an "episode of consolation," a symbol of the faithful church. The general tone of each picture is dark; but this ray of light is in every case one of the features. It is enough, perhaps, to refer to these. In visions II and III they break in upon the sevenfold division and are most clearly of the nature of episodes. In vision II, chap. 7; III, chaps. 10; 11: 1-13; IV, chap. 14: 1-5; V, chap. 15: 2-4; VI, chap. 19: 1-8; VII, chap. 20: 4-6, as well as 21: 1-7.

⁶The Aramaic Targum on the Song of Songs found in it an outline of Hebrew history. It was applied to Christian history by Aponius in the seventh century, by Lyra in the thirteenth, and in the seventeenth by Cocceius, Brightman, Hennischius, and John Cotton, the first minister of Boston. See the introduction to Ginsburg's Commentary.

or fact and the abstract idea denoted by the symbol. Thus the eagle is the symbol of the United States because it represents the abstract idea of freedom and independence; the lion is the symbol of another country as symbolizing strength and lordship; and so on. In the study of the symbols of the Revelation, therefore, the first question need not be as to the concrete, but as to the abstract. For example, in chap. 6, the red horse and its rider symbolize war; whether some war in particular is symbolized, or all the wars of the Christian dispensation, is an independent question. (A comparison of the symbols of this chapter with our Lord's words in Matthew, chap. 24, makes it clear that the reference is general, not particular.) Similarly in other cases, even where the idea suggested by the symbol finds a concrete embodiment in the writer's own time, the question is a fair one whether we are to confine its meaning to that one fulfilment, or to regard it as symbolizing any and all subsequent events or characters to which it may seem applicable. And even if we do not incline to regard the symbol as representing directly more than one thing, it is still open to us to regard the first-century embodiment of the idea as typical of any similar events or characters in subsequent centuries, and so we may arrive at substantially the same result in another way. The interpretation which looks for repeated realizations of the ideas of the symbols through all the ages is the more suitable if we regard the book as truly inspired for the edification and consolation of God's people at the different stages of his church's history.

If this view be true, we may expect to find in the book a philosophy of Christian history in symbols. We study the history of God's dealings with men in former times, especially the record of the Old Testament, with a view of deducing for our comfort and guidance the principles of his dealings, the philosophy of the history of his people of old. In this book we may consider that we have those principles foreshadowed in symbols which were afterward to be illustrated in the events of Christian history. Not "the history of events before they came to pass"⁷ have we here—if the purpose of the book were to inform the

⁷ BUTLER'S *Analogy*, Pt. II, chap. 7.

church of any age as to what future events were to be expected, it has been a signal failure—but the *philosophy* of the history of future events we may venture to call the Apocalypse.

7. To take some examples, the two wild beasts of chap. 13, the one compounded of the four of Daniel's vision of the world-powers, the other compounded of Lamb and Dragon, must refer in John's day to the Roman empire, the great world-power, and to some seductive or persuasive influence, be it philosophy, culture, or religion, which served at that time to support and recommend the worship of Rome in the person of the emperor. But the Roman empire and its priesthood are gone, have the Beasts disappeared? or are they reserved, as the book seems to indicate, to be destroyed at the final consummation? They have not disappeared, if we regard them as symbolizing two of the forms of worldliness ever brought to bear against the church—compulsion and persuasion, force and fraud. Whenever we see the power of the state or any kind of force brought to bear to the spiritual injury of Christians, whenever we see a non-theistic philosophy or an unbelieving science with its miracles used to destroy the faith of the elect, we are sure that the first and the second beast are still to be reckoned with.

Again, is Babylon still with us? The impression of the city derived from a study of chap. 18, with its lists of the articles of commerce there consumed, is of a seat of selfish luxury. This in John's time is explained to be the seven-hilled city that "hath dominion over the kings of the earth"—pagan Rome. The woman is seated upon the beast—the godless, luxurious civilization of Rome directed for its own ends the great world-power, luxury guided force; but the vision of its fall, when the beast turns upon its harlot-queen, is fulfilled whenever such a selfish civilization is destroyed by that very principle of force upon which it once rested. Where, then, is Babylon now? Not in Rome, not in any one city, but wherever selfish luxury maintains itself by force. Nor need we look outside of nominal Christendom for the antitype. And the vision itself suggests, by the name "harlot" used so often in Scripture of God's people unfaithful to their marriage covenant, and by the fact that the destruc-

tion of the harlot is represented as coincident with the purification of the true, faithful church for its final union with the heavenly bridegroom (19: 2, 7, 8), that Babylon will be in the last days nothing more nor less than one aspect of a Christendom which has forgotten its relation to its absent Lord.⁸

8. The study of the structure and the interpretation of the Apocalypse along the lines thus sketched leads to conclusions as to its main teaching which are drawn out in the following outline. In each vision the central teaching is first briefly stated, and then the more detailed interpretation is given.

OUTLINE OF INTERPRETATION.

I. THE CHURCH'S CHARACTER (CHAPS. 1-3).

Christ cares for the church, though it is tainted with evil; and he promises suitable rewards to each victor.

The church, manifold, yet one in Christ, is the light of the world (chap. 1). Persecutions from without, heresies and deadness within, endanger it; but the ascended Christ cares for it; and each several victor in its conflict shall share the future blessings revealed in this book (chaps. 2 and 3).

II-VI.—THE CHURCH'S WARFARE.

II. (THE SEALS, CHAPS. 4-7.)

Amid the sufferings of this present time the church is safe; and its final reward is sure.

The church's conflict is carried on in the presence and under the supervision of God the Creator (chap. 4). The crucified and risen Christ shares God's throne; he alone can, and he at last will, fully reveal God's plans in this conflict (chap. 5).

As his truth spreads in the world, there accompany it wars, famines, pestilences, repeated persecutions which call for vengeance, dread of coming judgment; each of which things, however, is not an obstacle, but the removal of an obstacle, to that final revelation (chap. 6). God's own people are kept safe in the tribulation, and shall come safely out of it to the eternal rest of heaven (chap. 7; 8:1).

III. (THE TRUMPETS, CHAPS. 8-11.)

God's judgments and the church's witness vainly summon the wicked world to repentance.

The prayers of the saints for the coming of the kingdom begin to be answered by sore judgments upon the ungodly, intended as trumpet-calls to repentance, but rather proving them ripe for punishment (chaps. 8 and 9).

⁸ See, by all means, MILLIGAN, *Revelation of St. John*, pp. 182 ff.

This series of visions leads to the end of history, but more detailed testimony is to be borne by the seer. Thus to take God's word on the lips is pleasant, but that one may rightly bear witness for him. His Word must, by bitter experience, become a very part of one's self (chap. 10). Faithful men [in church and state] shall thus bear witness in the power of the Spirit, during a period of predominance of evil in the church which shall seem to overcome them, but truth will prevail in the end. At last the kingdom of the world shall be Christ's, and the dead shall be judged (chap. 11).

IV. (THE BEASTS, CHAPS. 12-14.)

Worldly force and fraud, Satan's agents, shall not permanently prevail against the faithful.

This conflict, and partial predominance of evil, are now more fully explained.—Satan, baffled in his endeavor to prevail against Christ in the flesh (who has ascended into heaven, destined to rule the world), or to destroy his church as a whole, tries new assaults against his brethren upon earth (chap. 12). The great world-power, Satan's representative, aided by the world's religion, wisdom, and culture, is aroused against Christians for a certain limited period (chap. 13); yet Christ's own, pure and true, shall triumph. There shall follow judgments, the overthrow of a selfish, luxurious civilization, the destruction of the worldly.—Happy are those who die in Christ!—at last the righteous shall be gathered in; the wicked shall suffer God's vengeance (chap. 14).

V. (THE BOWLS, CHAPS. 15, 16.)

Reiterated judgments upon the worldly only intensify their hatred of God.

The victory of the faithful over the assaults of the world is assured (chap. 15); and the world-power itself is to suffer those final strokes of the wrath of God which his righteousness demands. These last plagues, no longer partial but complete, are to be poured upon the worldly, turning their blessings into curses; but they result, not in repentance, but in greater hatred of God. These judgments conclude with a preparation for the great final conflict, and with the actual overthrow of godless luxury (chap. 16).

VI. (BABYLON, CHAPS. 17; 18; 19:1-10.)

When luxurious, godless civilization is forcibly overthrown, the church is made ready for the final reward.

A luxurious civilization controlled the world-power for several stages of its existence, being centralized in Rome in the days of the empire at least; but when the world-power shall finally be embodied in Antichrist (in the times of the "ten" kingdoms that succeed to the empire), the seat of selfish, luxurious civilization, then identical with the unfaithful part of the Christian church, shall be destroyed by that very principle of brute force which it formerly controlled and directed (chap. 17). The laments of the worldly are offset by the joy of the spiritually-minded; for now the way is open for the purified church's perfect union with Christ (chaps. 18; 19:1-10).

VII, VIII. THE CHURCH'S VICTORY (CHAPS. 19:11—22:9).

Christ shall finally come and crush all hostile powers, and the risen and glorified church shall have lasting peace.

VII. (THE VICTORY, CHAPS. 19:11—21:8.)

Before this consummation, however, he who is the Word of God comes, and enters upon his final conflict with world-power and -wisdom, to the destruction of them and their followers (chaps 19:11—end). Satan himself, having been restrained for a long season, while the martyrs and faithful endowed with new life exercise authority in the world, regains power, and makes his last effort by stirring up the savage part of humanity, but is himself utterly overthrown.⁹ Death (the last enemy) shall now be destroyed by the general resurrection; the wicked shall suffer the second death (chap. 20); while the church victorious shall reign as God's sons in the new Jerusalem, upon the new earth under new skies.

VIII. (JERUSALEM, CHAPS. 21:9—22:9.)

This center of the "social life of the world to come" is the bride of Christ, the faithful church. It is the outcome of the apostles' work; it shall be glorious and with room for all, harmonious in diversity, all pure and true, secure and eternal, satisfying all needs and supplying abundant opportunities for activity, filled with the presence and the beatific vision of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Christ comes quickly to judge. Seek pardon and sanctification, lest character become fixed in evil, and you be cast out. The Spirit in the church calls to Christ and bids all men to him.

I am not at all sure that the book of Revelation adds to our store of knowledge. Nor does a great poem; nor does a gallery of pictures; nor does an oratorio. But even if it conveys no new information upon the subjects of which it treats—the principles and plans of divine action, the past and the future of the church—it surely does picture these things, in forms which appeal to some minds, if not to all, in such wise as to become through all the ages, whenever the church or any of its members are in the midst of tribulation and conflict, a source of consolation, encouragement, and hope.

⁹This sentence is intentionally made ambiguous. This and the preceding sentence may each cover the Christian dispensation, or both may be entirely future,